

**“DDD is always adapting to the environment, to the market, and to the demand...”**

## **A Conversation with Kay Lot, Board Member**

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard**

**July 8, 2025**

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you introduce yourself and share a bit about your role in DDD [Digital Divide Data], specifically in relation to everything you've done to build the Cambodia offices? How did Cambodia's history affect you and inspire you to go in that direction?**

**Kay Lot:** I was probably born in 1972; I'm not sure, because I don't have the birth certificate. My mom will barely remember. I had to go through the Khmer Rouge regime. I was in the children's camp, and my parent had to go away to the adult camp. Unfortunately, I had to go through the whole episode, the abuse, the torture. In Cambodia, we always remember it as 3 years, 8 months, and 20 days. We couldn't get out of it soon enough.

It shaped the person I am today because I learned the way to kill pain is to look it right in the eye and say, I'm going to get out of here, and when I'm in a good position, I will not be the same person you are. I don't hurt people because I know how much it hurts to be on the wrong end of violence. I share that to give you a bit of the context around why I do things, as it has become a very strong foundation of who I am today.

Fast forward to when I met Jeremy. It had nothing to do with DDD. We were both looking at the same company to invest in. It was an animation company that employed a lot of youth and disabled or disadvantaged people. I loved it because of the social aspects. We didn't know each other, but the guys said, There's another guy also looking at this. Maybe you can do it together. We ended up meeting and talking, but in the end, the project didn't take off because we both decided after a long look that it wasn't viable. We walked away from it, but we didn't walk away from each other. Jeremy got back in touch and asked if I wanted to sit on the board of DDD. I said I'd look into what DDD does, and once I did, there was very little hesitation. That's how I got here.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What have you experienced as a board member in terms of the changes within DDD? What were some of the big questions you've had to answer or choices you've had to make as part of the board?**

**Kay Lot:** I always joke with the guys that there's never a dull moment with DDD. I vividly remember my first board meeting in Virginia. At that time, we had to deal with issues with Liberty Source, one of our subsidiaries, and it was quite bad. The board had an existential discussion, but we survived. Over the years, we keep finding ways of being agile, of being flexible and being able to navigate any situation presented to us.

After everything happened with Liberty Source, COVID happened. Every single time, the management and the team pulled off whatever was needed. They keep doing a fantastic job. If I compare our latest board meeting a few days ago to the first board meeting I joined almost six years ago, it was very different. Over five and a half years, we moved from a discussion about survival to a discussion about thriving. How do we get from \$10 to \$20 million? It's a great problem to have.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you have any advice for people who are trying to work with governments? What are you finding to be effective in working with governments? Does everything that you've gone through make your relationship with the government stronger or weaker?**

**Kay Lot:** I would say no, my background doesn't have a significant impact. If you are the same age as me, or older, you went through the same thing, one way or another. We don't even talk about that history. It doesn't make a difference to us. A lot of the younger generation feels like things are overdramatized, like it's some sort of story you've made up.

I'm pretty encouraged by the new generation of government officials. The government is pretty progressive with the younger leadership. They are very open to technology, and they are pushing very hard on the e-government initiative. They want the government to go digital.

What's even better is they've got younger and very well-educated people working. They are competing with us in the private sector with fantastic talents. I see PhDs who've come back from the US or Europe working in the government. They've come to join the government, and they're very open-minded. It's a bit of fresh air. I'm excited. If we keep our eyes and ears open and be open to the relationship, I think we can have a mutually respectful and beneficial relationship with the government.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What's happening right now in your area of the world that leads you to reflect on your government being young, open and ready to do all these great things?**

**Kay Lot:** We have a new head of government, who is young and dynamic. He went to West Point in the US, and he did economics in the UK. He understands what drives the economy and how to make progress. With him also comes a younger generation of civil servants. He attracts the good, very talented people who hold PhDs or master's degrees

from the US. They go and serve in the government. We need to talk to them. They understand what we're talking about. Maybe before it was different, harder to get your message across, but now, I think they're pretty open to it.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What is the inspiration there? What draws a Cambodian youth who is into technology and economics, and who's spent time in America, to come back to Cambodia and become a civil servant?**

**Kay Lot:** I don't know. I think they feel excited. For the past 20-30 years, our exchange rate against the US dollar has been exactly the same. It goes up by 3%, it goes down by 5%, and then after 30 years, it's exactly where it was. The stability is there. Then, on the other side, there's economic growth. You see the prospect of being a part of something for the future.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you look at DDD's training model and other training models that you've run or that you're a part of, how would you compare them? What do you think DDD is getting right in their training or getting wrong in their training?**

**Kay Lot:** Over the years, we get some right and some wrong. What DDD does very well, and what is not normally done in Cambodia, is teach soft skills like discipline, responsibilities, getting the job done, and collaboration. These are things that you don't get taught in school. There's no curriculum for anything like that.

We bring graduates, or year two and year three students, through their training and make them understand how important these soft skills are. We train them on how to prepare themselves for a job interview, for example. These are the basic skills and things that sometimes, or most of the time, people just take for granted. They don't really appreciate them. At the end of the day, it's the foundation that determines how you progress in your career. That is what DDD does very well.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What do you think it does less well? What do you think it can get better at in the next 25 years?**

**Kay Lot:** I don't know. Over the past five and a half years, I've seen things that are evolving and changing all the time, but it's always for the better. DDD is always adapting to the environment, to the market, and to the demand, as well.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You lead many businesses in Cambodia, and one of your roles on the board is observing the ecosystem, observing the trainings, and observing how the economy is shaping up, and then bringing those insights into DDD. How do you feel that's reflected in the ways DDD has changed?**

**Kay Lot:** I'm not sure DDD has changed because of something I brought. I think it's more us working collectively at the board level and figuring out the best way forward.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What about DDD makes it work in the private sector? What makes it so successful in that regard?**

**Kay Lot:** I think the key is the soft skills that we train people on. When they come through our program, they finish their degree and graduate, and then they either go on to work in their dream job or they stay on with us, as an employee of DDD. Whatever they choose, they become a better person. I think that is very, very important. In the normal private sector, for example, where I came from before, we don't care what happens after. You either do it or you're out the door. DDD's culture is different. We try and explain to people, This is the culture. It's a good culture. It will help you become a better person and have a better future.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Can you tell me a story of someone from DDD, or something that happened at DDD, that you feel encompasses this culture?

**Kay Lot:** People like Irving. He's the kind of statesman that I look up to, or Bob, for example. They've got the wisdom to maintain the balancing act between doing good and doing well. Doing good, meaning to get the business going and make it sustainable so we can stand on our own two feet. Then with that, we do well on the impact side in terms of the mission and the social aspect. Learning from their wisdom and their example has helped me grow as a person. I'm very blessed to be a part of this team.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** What are three things you would like to see DDD do in the next few years, either short-term or long-term?

**Kay Lot:** I'd love to see them move on from \$10 million to \$20 million to maybe five times that. With this team's capabilities, enthusiasm, and agility, there is no limit to the upside.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** What are two other things you'd wish that they would do or engage in?

**Kay Lot:** Impact. I'm all for the business doing good, and then let's redesign our impact. What makes DDD different from others is that we do this work with a focus on social impact. That's why many of us, including me, join the board. We put our time and our effort into this.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Do you feel like DDD has changed Cambodia? Do you feel like the impact is at a national level?

**Kay Lot:** Yes, for sure. I think we have contributed so much to so many people, and they have gone on to become successful in their lives, in their careers. We've made a lot of impact in 25 years. The country has also changed in a positive way. The economy has grown, and now we need to reimagine our own model as well so we can continue to stay relevant and stay impactful for the country.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Thank you so much for your time and insights.

*Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer. She strategizes on communications, metrics, impact, product and technology, leveraging platforms for the network and creating cool content. She also leads the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of SJN that uses targeted research and analysis to identify and interrogate what's working and what's not in a particular sector or field. She has an MFA from Columbia's film program and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Prism.*

*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*